

In Conversation with Michael Barker-Caven, Director of *Richard II* for Ouroboros Theatre, Ireland, in a Co-Production with the Abbey Theatre/Everyman Theatre, Cork, April 2013

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At the time when I first met Michael Barker Caven, he was Artistic Director of the Everyman Theatre, Cork. Prior to that, between 1995 and 2004, he had been Artistic Director of Ouroboros Theatre Company (previously Theatreworks). In 2013 he joined hands with actor Denis Conway, then the Director of Ouroboros, in a co-production with the Abbey Theatre where a new version of *Richard II* was staged. The project was part of the company's investigation of Shakespeare's history plays through a relocation of a classic tale into contemporary times.

A prolific and internationally acclaimed theatre, musical and opera director, Barker-Caven has worked extensively in London's West End as well as directing several award-winning shows in Ireland over the past twenty years. His theatre works include *Best Man* (Everyman Theatre/Project Arts Centre), *October*, *Miss Julie*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Blackbird*, *The Secret Garden*, *Dandelions*, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* and *Skylight* (Landmark Productions), *Little Women*, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, *Anna Karenina*, *Old Times*, *The Shape of Things*. Among his opera work it is worth recalling *Albert Herring* (Mid Wales Opera), *Pagliacci* (Everyman/Cork Operatic), *Medea* (Glimmerglass Opera, New York), *The Duenna* (ETO/Royal Opera House), *The Mines of Sulphur*, and *Transformations* (Wexford Festival).

He has been awarded the Irish Times Theatre Award Winner for Best Opera in 2006 and 2008, prestigious Irish Times, Irish Theatre Awards in 2006, 2008 and 2012 with a further six personal nominations in 1998, 2001, 2002 and twice in 2014 (including three for Best Director). Since 1998, his productions have received twenty-five nominations at these annual awards.

LOREDANA SALIS The Ouroboros script for *Richard II* follows Shakespeare's text rather faithfully, although about 500 lines are omitted and the dramatis personae are reduced by about 11 characters. This was done probably to shorten a long text (about three hours on the stage) and speed up the play's tempo. And there were also role double ups.

MICHAEL BARKER-CAVEN Yes, it was in part due to doubling up, culling of characters, cutting of text etc.

L.S. What was omitted were mostly lines from minor characters. Some were missing, while others acquired a special role. I am thinking of your recasting of the usurper Bolingbroke as Irish 'hero' Michael Collins. The two images seemed to collide, or perhaps you wanted to suggest Collins' responsibility for the Treaty that led to Partition? In other words, Ireland was usurped of the six northern counties also because of Collins' doubts?

M.B. Because we were deliberately using the play to travel through a wide period of Irish history - from a late 19th century world right up to the present day - Bolingbroke went through a number of phases; part Patrick Pearse, part Michael Collins, part de Valera, part Charles Haughey, part Enda Kenny. He moved through all these stages to show how the ideals of the formation of the Republic were eroded by the ambitions and limitations of those who took up the mantle of leading it. The production charted the fall of a flawed but once noble cosmically empowered wisdom tradition (embodied by the king) and the rise of a noble but eventually flawed secular political tradition (embodied by Bolingbroke). As one falls the other rises into power, but as one rises into power it loses all sense of its role in the cosmic balance that true leadership should provide. In a sense it was about a wisdom tradition that had gone to seed and has to fall before it can be reclaimed in the direst, most marginalised of places (hence Richard as a hunger striker discussing with us the most profound meanings in life) whilst simultaneously something rotten within comes to the surface and supplants the old tradition, replacing it with a mechanical, machine like *Realpolitik* mindset. The 'nothing' that Shakespeare proposes is of course a necessary death of ego - death of what Carlos Castaneda termed the Predators Mind - from which a new understanding can be born. The 'rebel' that Richard becomes is now imprisoned and awaiting the final sentence. But as such he has never been freer whilst the ideals of Pearse and Collins have been hijacked and imprisoned into a 'power of state' mentality and become as bad as those they sought to replace. I hope this makes sense?

L.S. How did the audience in Cork, Collins's birthplace, react?

M.B. In Cork we found no obvious opposition and a great deal of appreciation for this journey; interestingly the most intelligent and perceptive review of the production was posted by the political editor in a leader column of the local newspaper.

- L.S. Another interesting character change regards Bagot. In your version of the story, Bagot is not part of the triad against Bolingbroke, and at one stage this 'other' Bagot goes off 'to Wales', not to Ireland, as in the original. People laughed at that line during the performance.
- M.B. There was nothing particularly special about Bagot other than he was more the clown, the court jester (but no true fool!) than Bushy and Green. We treated the three rather like the three witches in Macbeth (which they in some ways pre-empt), each with a particular controlling aspect over Richard's 'fate'. The decision not to stay together but for them to part once news of Bolingbroke's landing arrives, seals their fate. Because we cut the part of Salisbury it made sense that Bagot should be the one to vainly try to rally the Welsh forces (hence his saying he will go to Wales not Ireland); the foppish clown has no power to stop the cosmic order from righting itself. I think people laughed simply because they recognised a rat fleeing a sinking ship and looking for any excuse not to get trapped with his two comrades. They also perhaps 'got' his hopeless task in the face of such an invading army.
- L.S. It is interesting that *your* Bagot betrays Richard.
- M.B. Yes we did play on the fact that Bagot betrays the king; his 'fool' cannot aide him as Lear's does, and his betrayal is one of the first harsh lessons the pleasure seeking, indulgent, narcissistic king has to face. I do see *Richard II* as one of the blue prints for Shakespeare's later works. People treat it as a political/history play but it is far deeper than that - it is an esoteric text charting the fall, 'death', rebirth and final triumphant resurrection of his heroic vision of a lost whole soul.
- L.S. Such a religious ritualistic vision of the world depicted by Shakespeare seems to be a crucial aspect of your reading. In the Programme Notes for *Richard II* you speak of "cosmic consequences" and make references to myth and the ritual of ancient drama. The Ouroboros performance opened and ended with rituals - half pagan half Christian - and Queen Isabella played a fundamental role there. She was evidently more than Richard's wife.
- M.B. The Queen to us was absolutely pivotal. She opened and closed our production; the blooms of the flowering tree were her pivotal concern. She was the embodiment of lost, traumatised, ancient goddess wisdom (symbolising the divine knowledge of the fully embraced universe). The film you saw¹ sadly goes blank during Richard's prison monologue, his murder and through to the revealing of the King's

1 M.B. refers to the recording of the performance at Cork's Everyman Theatre on 23 April 2013. That video is available online. URL vimeo.com/67800873 (2017-11-15).

body to Bolingbroke. What you miss is that the Queen has become a captive 'wife' of the new regime, bound by Bolingbroke to him in dumb acquiesce. Only at Richard's death does she get to show what lives on inside her; the truth of Love. And the flower she clutches to her breast as she lies in his grave is their child to be in the future... whatever that may prove to be.

L.S. There is little doubt as to the importance of the female presence both in Shakespeare and in your reworking of *Richard II*. You truly gave it prominence.

M.B. Indeed the Queen was a central part of our production. As you know the 'female' presence - or absence, or misappropriation, or misunderstanding - is for me the key element of Shakespeare's work whether it be personal, social, cultural, religious, political or mythical. I am hugely in line with Ted Hughes on this matter. For me it is the pivotal issue that Shakespeare was attempting to explore, nay fix, within his work - a reconciliation and growth of understanding that he took through his work until eventual completion in the last great series of plays culminating with *The Tempest*. In essence it is the absent goddess figure that western culture finally interred in the form of the Virgin Mary, the culmination of a process that dates back beyond the Bronze Age and which has so deformed our world. The great mother goddess who once was the source of everything - all life, all bounty all wisdom of being - that our ancient ancestors once lived by, but bit by strange bit dismantled with such catastrophic consequences for the modern psyche. The imposition of the monotheistic mindset, denying the feminine as part and parcel of godhead, reached its apotheosis in the reformation and in some senses that madness was the last battle for her belonging, for Catholicism still contained her embers in the form of Mary, mangled and stripped of her creative powers as she may be, a figure that Protestantism was seeking to final displace along with the feared 'Whore of Babylon' and all other female psychic images. The collective unconscious as a result went mad and for me Shakespeare is the artist who captures that turmoil in his work. Hence in our production the Queen represented this ousted, centrifugal force without which Richard as King is both incomplete and misaligned. It's there in the text although as always with the truly mythic levels of Shakespeare's verse, not so easy to see on a surface reading.

L.S. And you tried to make it visible by making her perform different roles.

M.B. In our ritualised opening dream dumb show, the queen sleep walks on in her night clothes to the sacred tree in full bloom which she guards and treasures but upon which begins to fall an icy snow - she turns to Richard, who ignores her implicit request, and instead points

to Mowbray to take away a trussed up body, (the remains of the murdered Duke of Gloucester), and depose of it. This sequence set up their separation and her turmoil; for the tree was her and him together, the tree of wisdom and life, and the cosmic forces now bring to it an icy blast in response to their divide and Richard's stuttering rule.

As we began our work for real she is a silent figure (a classic Shakespearean device). Present at court but silent and powerless. Her position beside the king has been taken over by three men, who like the three witches in *Macbeth*, show all the signs of being men/women (that is of ambiguous origin) and who greedily surround Richard as sycophant controllers who in some sense hold him in their spell. It is as if Richard has handed over his sexual relationship, his intimacy and his access to wisdom to these men, territories that should have been the queen's. One relatively early moment really stood out for me; when Richard visits Old John of Gaunt she accompanies him, but says almost nothing during the terrible scene of humiliation that follows where Richard wilfully strips the old man of status and wealth. At the end of that scene we played a full verse line of silence between them before he squeezes out:

Come on, our queen: to-morrow must we part;
Be merry, for our time of stay is short.

In this couplet the bareness and fakery of their current state of affairs is so pitifully played out. She does not answer but follows sadly in his wake. The next time we meet her she is held 'captive' by the three whilst Richard is away. She is driven to the point of madness by what is going on - the leaves and blooms are falling from her tree and she tries desperately to replace them as they berate her (again bare foot in her nightdress, stripped of her dignity but in a way showing her purity of spirit and her unsullied soul in contrast to their finery and decadence). She feels at her core the danger that is now abroad - she is in a state of near mourning for life and she will not be placated. Her lines are key...

Some unborn sorrow, ripe in fortune's womb,
Is coming towards me, and my inward soul
With nothing trembles: at something it grieves

All is wrong and a terrible future awaits. She is prophetess at this stage, feeling the terror to come before it arrives in the conscious awareness of others. The "nothing" of course is non-being, death, decay - the cyclical calamity that must come before a new awareness can be born from the ashes, which is what will happen to Richard.

When the news arrives of Bolingbroke's betrayal she knows it like a truth long known, and when we next see her she is being carefully marshalled by the maid who we played as a plant of York's to manage her. It is as if no one realises/faces up to what they have done to her and now she must be 'disposed of'.

So we find her in the garden having to 'play' with her shallow watcher. In her despair she tears up the roots of the now barren tree she is responsible for with the furious words: "Was I born to this...? Pray God the plants thou graft'st may never grow". Hers is a curse... for the realm will not blossom again in such circumstances (though the gardener plants some herbs of grace where her tears fell - the sign that something of honesty will eventually be reborn).

We next meet her, alone, on the side of the road waiting to see her husband dragged through the crowds in chains like a common prisoner (like one of the women awaiting Christ as he carries his cross). It is her words of nobility and fierce courage which awaken something in him and pulls him from the brink of his self-pity.

Finally we see her in the last scene as almost a shadow. Dressed in plain black, captured by Bolingbroke (who by now is in his full modern politician look) she is now his silent, dark mistress - she dumbly dresses him in robotic fashion which he ignores as he gives instructions to others as to how the new regime will work - the shallow modern politician with his trophy wife. But then the body of Richard is revealed, lying in her earth, cleansed and reborn in death. As Bolingbroke leaves to go on his fake pilgrimage to the Holy Land (think about the so called 'War on Terror' we have sleep walked into) she walks silently to her love's grave and seeing the shoots of a new tree growing beside him, plucks a spray in flower and lays herself down at his side, wrapping herself around him as she always was.

L.S. She embodies the coming full circle of the Ouroboros, you could almost say. But then Richard too goes through his personal path of death, reconciliation and rebirth. Clearly, the transition to the status of tragic hero begins with the mirror scene. Unlike other performances and film adaptations, in your case the glass does not 'shatter' - as Shakespeare has it - but it cracks. Is this deliberate? Is there any deliberate reference to Ireland and England, and the distorted image of the cracked looking glass?

M.B. To be honest this was due to the technical limitations we faced. Once we had decided that Richard should handle and inspect the broken mirror then using real glass was no longer an option and we could not afford a sugar glass mirror to shatter each night (which I would have preferred). We played it that it cracked down the middle, which

for the actor was equally symbolic, for yes indeed the two halves of many images were captured for us by that single broken glass.

L.S. Speaking of what was symbolic in performance, and going back to where we began – things you added and things you omitted – I'd like to ask you about the music. There is music in Shakespeare, of course, and you seem to translate this quality of his work too, and use once again a contemporary dictionary, we may say. A distinctive feature of your production is definitely its varied musical repertoire. Did you choose the tracks, and what tracks were they?

M.B. I always direct through the use of music, both as a dramatic soundscape and as symbolic insertions that add texture and substance to the work. Almost all the music was either Irish or spiritually/ethnically derived – I wanted to make a clear 'Irish' statement throughout the piece. I used a wide number of sources but a voice that was particularly associated with the queen was that of Irish Singer Sinead O'Connor and the Australian Irish singer Lisa Gerrard – I wanted a strong female presence in the music. I also wanted the richness and shamanic calling of their voices to haunt the work to the same effect that religious music such as Gregorian chant or nuns singing can have. And I also wanted to use contemporary artists to express the feeling of now so that this old English text could be wrestled into a contemporary Irish consciousness. I also used some appropriate film score music – something I have always done as this form of music is deliberately crafted to suit dramatic works.

L.S. A reviewer observed, somehow ungenerously, that you took too much liberty and this excess of poetic licence resulted into a big restless chaos.

M.B. It was somewhat surprising to learn how literal and linear some of our theatre critics remain – that the art of symbolism seems entirely lost upon overly rational minds. To my mind such observers reveal their ignorance and are clearly ill equipped to do their professional task justice. I do understand that some choices took some people aback. Probably the most contentious was my use of *Bloody Sunday* by U2. This was a deliberate act of provocation to an Irish audience who would associate this rock anthem with the struggle against the English (although its composers have always resisted such shallow interpretations) and our playing it as Richard was imprisoned was shocking for many. That was the point – to shift the audience into a new state of discomfort and possible awareness for here was the English king, as political prisoner in his 'H block' cell, throwing excrement on his cell walls in dirty protest. I wanted the audience to deal with antithesis and to see him now as a human rebel, a stripped bare soul

able to think outside the box in the same way the Irish IRA prisoners managed to in the North. It certainly got everyone talking! No one didn't have an opinion on it. And that was the point. It was also the perfect piece to dramatically create his cell by and the actors really made it work visually. I still stand by my choice.

In 2014 Ouroboros ceased its activities as a theatre company. Michael Barker-Caven left the Cork Everyman Theatre, and went on to direct *The Bloody Irish... Songs of the 1916 Rising*, a theatrical recreation of the events occurred in Dublin during the Easter week, in 1916, which would lead to independence for Ireland and "mark the beginning of the end for the British Empire worldwide". Since 2016 he has been the Artistic Director of The Civic Theatre, Dublin.